

Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/97523/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Altenberg, Tilmann ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6686-6550> 2020.
Cifuentes-Goodbody, Nicholas: The man who wrote Pancho Villa: Martín Luis Guzmán and the politics of life writing. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP. 2016. xiv + 208 pp. [Book Review]. Bulletin of Spanish Studies 97 (5) , pp. 9-10.
10.1080/14753820.2020.1790974 file

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2020.1790974>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2020.1790974>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



This is a preprint of a review accepted for publication in the *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* © 2017. The *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* is available online at: <http://journalonline.tandf.co.uk/> with the open URL of this review.

Book Review: Cifuentes-Goodbody, Nicholas: *The Man Who Wrote Pancho Villa: Martín Luis Guzmán and the Politics of Life Writing*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP. 2016. xiv + 208 pp.

Martín Luis Guzmán, the Mexican writer, politician and publishing mogul, is best remembered for his Novels of the Revolution *El águila y la serpiente* (1928) and *La sombra del Caudillo* (1929). But, as this study by Nicholas Cifuentes-Goodbody reminds us, 'while Guzmán's novels are celebrated, Guzmán himself is not' (15). One of the book's aims is to shed light on the reasons for this discrepancy between an ongoing appreciation of (certain parts of) Guzmán's work, on the one hand, and the general disregard, if not disrespect, for the person, on the other.

Cifuentes-Goodbody argues convincingly that Guzmán's work can only be properly understood if we consider it in relation to the author's life. Far from proposing a traditional biographical reading though, the study traces the connections and tensions between Guzmán's life and his writing, exposing ways in which the author's changing life circumstances and preoccupation with posterity prompted him to repack his texts in an effort to ensure a coherent, ideologically sound reading of his achievements as an artist and an intellectual.

By approaching Guzmán's life and work from the perspective of life writing, Cifuentes-Goodbody manages to set the author's openly autobiographical writing in dialogue with his semi-autobiographical narratives and abundant biographical texts. The concept of life writing comes into its own when applied to Guzmán's creation of an all-encompassing autobiographical project: Cifuentes-Goodbody examines the strategic use the Mexican made of his body of work, auto/biographical or otherwise, to align himself at different times with those in power. He shows that the inconsistencies and gaps in the narrative Guzmán constructed about himself did not go unchallenged in his lifetime, and highlights the author's drawn-out efforts to impose his version of events. As the study is careful to point out, Guzmán's case is not an isolated one but 'provides an insight into the much larger phenomenon of individuals laying a personal claim to recent history' (11).

Had Guzmán not lived to see the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, we would have been spared the ugliest documented detail of his later life that reveals the extent to which the octogenarian had lost touch with the social reality around him. His taking sides with President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz against the student movement and large sections of the Mexican intelligentsia was a low point in Guzmán's trajectory, and one from which his image would not recover. The Guzmán that emerges from this study is an unsavoury character, a kind of real-life Artemio Cruz: ambitious, opportunistic, self-possessed, and deluded about his shift from dissident to regime writer, as well as about his place in history. The book's overall persuasiveness notwithstanding, in places it exudes a sense of personal disappointment at Guzmán's failure to live up to the image he expended so much effort on. Granted, as a personality in public life, Guzmán can and should be held to higher standards of integrity and consistency than private individuals caught in daily acts of tweaking the story of their lives. But as calculating as Guzmán may have been, a more sympathetic, less judgmental account of his political choices could have made certain allowances for the demanding vicissitudes of his time, old age, and (why not?) human nature.

Throughout the six chapters of this well-documented and theoretically sophisticated, yet eminently readable, study Cifuentes-Goodbody moves with ease between perceptive close reading of key passages from Guzmán's oeuvre and the bigger picture of the author's life writing. The study avoids a strict chronological design, starting with a lucid analysis of Guzmán's autobiographical 'Apunte sobre una personalidad' (1954), which serves as a point of reference throughout the inquiry. Subsequent chapters address a range of questions arising from the gaps and inconsistencies observed in that text. Cifuentes-Goodbody writes in elegant prose, free from academic mannerisms, and keeps notes to a minimum. A comfortable level of redundancy of information and repetition of key arguments alleviates the burden on the reader to keep track of central ideas. With a few exceptions at word level, Guzmán's work is quoted in English only, however. While this makes the book accessible to an (unlikely) audience unable to engage with the original texts, those capable of reading Spanish and sensitive to the textuality of the original language may find this practice frustrating. The misleading main title aside, in the final analysis the book makes a significant contribution to the study of Martín Luis Guzmán, and draws attention to the ethical implications of life writing more widely.